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The critique of the equation and the phenomenology of production

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Review of

Representing 'Capital': A Reading of Volume One.

Fredric Jameson

London: Verso

Abstract:

In *Representing Capital*, Fredric Jameson distinguishes two stages of inquiry present within the Marx's *magnum opus*. The first is the critique of the equation. The second is the phenomenology of production. The distinction suggests compelling methodological applications. This review explores some implications for the analysis of capitalist social relations.

Paper:

In his recent book on Marx's *Capital*¹ Fredric Jameson distinguishes two stages of inquiry present within the earlier work. The first is the critique of the equation. The second is the phenomenology of production. The distinction suggests compelling methodological applications. This review explores some implications for the analysis of capitalist social relations.

Seen in the context of his recent work, *Representing Capital* marks both a continuation and the resolution of an absence. It is the third in what is so far a triumvirate of direct engagements with the dialectic in its manifold representations.²

Valences of the Dialectic examined the dialectical method of a plethora of proponents save for that of Marx himself. Jameson noted that this was like having 'Hamlet without the prince'.³ The close reading of Marx given in this instalment rectifies matters somewhat. Jameson is at pains to emphasise the dialectical status of *Capital*, taken both as the sum of its parts and as the parts themselves.

In *Valences*, it is suggested that the dialectic applies itself where incommensurability appears. Jameson carries this insight forward here. A large portion of the book develops a critique of the 'mathematical abstraction' by which valorisation operates in capitalist society. It focuses upon the incongruity of the abstraction of a smooth, homogeneous space of equality and exchange from distinct qualities.

¹ Marx 1990

² Jameson 2010a and 2010b

³ *ibid.*, n. 68, pp. 69-70

In this sense, Jameson operates in the context of the 'dilemma of incommensurability' that he highlights in *Valences*.⁴ Incommensurability necessitates the appearance of the dialectic in some form. It assists in our understanding of how this incommensurability is overcome. Jameson uses Marx to interrogate the conditions of commensurability. This centres upon a critical reconstruction of the corollaries of commensuration. Such corollaries include exchange, equality, equivalence, abstraction, reflection and equilibrium.

Jameson constructs *Representing Capital* around his rethinking of the progression of the initial volume of Marx's magnum opus. The first chapter deals with Part One of *Capital*, which Jameson sees as an isolatable text centring upon the 'critique of the equation'. The second chapter then deals with the middle and largest swathe of *Capital*. Jameson sees Parts Two to Seven offering a 'phenomenology of production' that complements and completes the 'critique of the equation'.

The third chapter then discusses Part Eight as a separate piece of work comparable to the status awarded Part One. Part Eight outlines the preconditions guaranteeing capitalism's existence. But this historicising scrutiny also indicates its fragility, and promises the possibility of its end.

The final four shorter chapters cover, respectively, time, space, the dialectic and politics in their relation to *Capital*. These chapters tie together the analyses of Parts One to Eight of *Capital* with a more general series of reflections. The first three chapters of this closing quarter place the book within Jameson's contemporary dialectical work.

The closing chapter carries forward a controversial claim made at the beginning as regards *Capital's* lack of political content. *Representing Capital's* theoretical headline lies in the claim that *Capital* is not about politics or labour, but unemployment (p. 2). The first denial carries echoes of the historical celebration of Marx's scientific objectivity. The second denial and the conclusion will stoke greater controversy. Understandably, it is this that has garnered the most attention in existing responses to the book.⁵ This focus is not misplaced.

This review assesses a wider and more insistent project at the heart of Jameson's reading of Marx. Jameson's project rests on his identification of a 'break' in *Capital*. In examining this claim, it is chiefly the first two chapters of Jameson's book that I will focus on in my review. This both circumvents and complements the focus placed upon the rest of *Representing Capital* in the extant reviews issued since its release.

Jameson suggests that the first three chapters of *Capital* constitute a standalone section. He contends that Subsequent chapters then proceed to plunge deep into the phenomenological realm of production. In so doing, Jameson offers much more than a reinterpretation.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 24

⁵ See Kraniauskas 2012, Choat 2012 and MacGregor 2012 for instance

Rather, it suggests a methodology of how one might critically approach capital in its manifold dimensions.

Jameson's parsing of Part One from the remainder of *Capital* speaks to an early demarcation made by Althusser. Althusser notoriously recommended that one could skip the first three chapters when reading *Capital* for the first time.⁶ Those chapters have long held a reputation for being the trickiest part of the book. Indeed, Althusser was likely reacting to the sheer practicalities of reading groups dwindling in number and waning in interest. Premature withdrawal owing to Part One's complexity closed off the material most expedient to the class and labour struggles of the time.

The Althusserian solution to this has left a legacy that work such as Jameson's helps in overturning. Jameson's divorce of the first part from the rest of the book is much different to Althusser's. Today, Althusser's advice seems conspicuous in the context of a significant reinvigoration of value theory.⁷ But what is common to both recently rediscovered or newly translated readings and contemporary value-form approaches is their insistence upon careful study of the progression of categories in Part One. Present-day debates depend upon often divergent close readings of the first three chapters.

Sometimes, these debates spill over into polemics about just how best to read Marx's work. This is especially pertinent to the anecdotal rise in *Capital* reading groups since the Great Recession. It is to this largely autodidactic context that Althusser's advice has traditionally been addressed. Take the critique of David Harvey's popular online reading group recently issued by the London-based collective Critisticuffs.⁸ The critique is oriented towards the relative efficacy of different approaches to the act of reading Marx. The perceived weakness of Harvey's approach lies in his elision of key categorical progressions present in the first chapter specifically. From these initial oversights stem wider issues. The commitment to an ever closer study of these progressions is subject to, and nourishing of, alternative views of what is present and possible in the world. Put simply, there are deliberate and ultimately political choices at play in how one approaches *Capital*.

Jameson contributes to this contested terrain. In separating the first part from the rest of the book, Jameson differs from Althusser in endowing it with even greater importance rather than less. Jameson has clearly felt it necessary to provoke a return to and serious study of the first three chapters at a time that many others entertain the same urge. But, as we shall see, Jameson restores the link between the first part and the whole by means of a

⁶ Althusser 2001, p. 52. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for the motivation to exploit the differences between Althusser and Jameson on this point.

⁷ This resurgence represents only the latest development in an often dormant arc of Marxian theorisation of which stellar English-language examples and overviews include Rubin 1972, the contributions collected in Elson 1979 and Heinrich 2012.

⁸ Critisticuffs 2014

clever staging of Marx's method. That which follows Part One is seen as completing the foundational work begun in the first three chapters.

Representing Capital adds its weight to a growing literature that has no truck with the Althusserian shortcut. Contemporary readings of Part One reveal labour, value and money to be subject to a social relation of considerable abstraction. The close study of the first three chapters counsels against the belief in easy solutions. But the circumnavigation of Part One perpetuates age-old difficulties and misunderstandings over what Marx has to say about value as a social form. The uncritical and vulgar results have had boring and often dangerous consequences.

Against this background, Jameson's critique of the mathematical abstraction of capital and the social forms it assumes has much to offer. In the patient and considered reading of Part One of which Althusser absolved his readers, Jameson captures the complexity of the nexus of value, labour and money.

The ground upon which Jameson stakes his demarcation of Part One from the rest of *Capital* is its bearing of a 'critique of the equation'. This critique that is both separate from and foundational to the remainder of Marx's complete inquiry. This critique of 'mathematical abstraction' attempts to answer the central riddle of *Capital*. This consists of two questions (pp. 22-23). The first is 'how can one object be the equivalent of another one?' Jameson suggests that Marx finds his answer to this question in money. For this he uses the 'critique of the equation' which occupies the first three chapters of *Capital*. This critique incorporates the discussion of circulation only. It deals in quantities rather than qualities, whilst advancing an immanent critique of the categories of the former.

The second question is 'how can the capitalist possibly make a profit out of the exchange of objects of equal value?' This question is answered with the theory of exploitation. This theory unfolds through a qualitative exploration of the realm of production. It is this 'phenomenology' which occupies the rest of *Capital*. The analysis of capitalist categories commences in the critique of the equation. It continues via a phenomenology of work emphasising quality over quantity.

Here Jameson renders an important contribution to the contention over how to read *Capital*. By casting Marx as progressing from the critique of the equation to the phenomenology of production, Jameson sees the two as continuous and necessary steps in a method.

This division of critique of the equation and the phenomenology of production places Jameson in a longer lineage of critical inquiry. Paul Connerton suggests two traditions within 'critique', loosely defined. On the one hand we have 'reconstruction', and, on the

other, 'criticism'.⁹ One might think about the two phases of Jameson's reading- the critique of the equation and the phenomenology of production- in these terms.

Reconstruction reflects 'on the conditions of possible knowledge'. It establishes the 'the faculties of knowing, speaking and acting.' The mode in which reality appears to us is constituted by human understanding. The object of knowledge thus issues from human cognition, using 'the a priori forms or 'categories'' with which we operate.¹⁰

Jameson's 'critique of the equation' (via Marx, of course) falls within this domain. It seeks to generate a conceptualisation of how the reality of capitalist valorisation is structured in its abstract, social procedure. The critique of the equation is a mode of reconstruction. It enunciates the conditions for the mathematical abstraction of value.

It is complemented in a wider critique by its counterpart, 'criticism'. The 'criticism' strand of critique contemplates the 'system of constraints' produced by human activity. It examines the 'distorting pressures to which individuals, or a group of individuals, or the human race as a whole, succumb in their process of self-formation'.¹¹

So reconstruction attempts to understand a system of rules or regulative modes of conduct that are experienced in a specific context. Criticism is much more particular in its focus upon individual identity or group identity, placing explicit emphasis on the subject itself. Reconstruction explains 'rules which we follow implicitly'. Criticism 'renders transparent what had previously been hidden'.¹²

In this sense, Jameson's identification in Marx of a phenomenology of production adds criticism to reconstruction. Following the reconstruction of capitalist categories in Part One, Marx conducts in Parts Two to Seven a criticism from the standpoint of experience.

We may see Jameson's reading of Marx as an attempt to express the possible grounds for a reconciliation of reconstruction and criticism. Critique functions here in its reconstructive mode as 'reflection on the conditions of possible knowledge'. It functions in its critical mode in 'the analysis of constraints to which classes of individuals are subject'.¹³ The so-called 'critique of the equation' corresponds to the first, and the 'phenomenology of production' to the second.

We will deal with each in turn. First is the critique of the equation represented by the first part of *Capital*. The association of *Capital* with a critique of the equation and its

⁹ Connerton 1976

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 17-19

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 18

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 19-20

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 20

mathematical abstraction is not uncontroversial. A sceptical response might point towards Marx's employment of quantitative material to support his arguments.

But, as Jameson highlights, Marx persistently draws a chiasmic kind of equivalence between the two terms of an equation. According to Jameson, Marx 'undermine[s]' the 'static or synchronic function of the equals sign'. This he does by relativizing each term based upon its position in the equation. By comparing two seemingly incomparable things, Marx generates a 'surrealist image'. The image achieves its surreal effect by 'juxtapos[ing] two objects as far from each other as possible' (p. 24).

A fine example of this quoted by Jameson is Marx's equation consisting of 'one volume of Propertius and eight ounces of snuff'.¹⁴ Through such flourishes, Marx undermines the abstraction upon which equation depends. Marx abstracts from concrete properties so as to render absurd the practice by which this abstraction proceeds in society itself. These quantitative forays do not represent earnest appeals to mathematics or science. Rather the often humorous equations presented by Marx are fragments of an immanent critique of the equation itself.

This critique of the equation revolves around a 'critique of identity' grounded in Hegel's dialectic of identity and difference. Jameson suggests that Marx goes much further than Hegel in his critique of the equation, composed as it is of four objects, to which we attach a fifth.

- 1) The first object of Marx's critique is political economy. Marx questions the theorisation of *exchange and equivalence* in the buying and selling of commodities, including labour power.
- 2) The second is the '*equality*' of capitalist individuals free to buy and sell labour. This freedom is established through the contract, which draws parity between employee and employer.
- 3) The third is the equivalence drawn between self-consciousness and consciousness. The *reflection* existing between the two called into question. This extends to the idea of artistic reflection between the work of art and the world it seeks to represent.
- 4) The fourth object of critique is the '*abstraction* involved in equating one concrete thing or phenomenon with another' (pp. 18-19, emphasis added).
- 5) One might also add to this Marx's critique of the idea of *equilibrium* in classical accounts of capitalist economy. This is hinted at but not fully enunciated in Jameson's roll-call of the elements of Marx's critique of the equation.

¹⁴ Marx 1990, p. 28

Marx thus places critical focus upon manifestations of purported *identity*. The positing of identity takes the form of exchange, equivalence, equality, reflection and equilibrium.

The critique of identity need not result in the uncritical 'affirmation of differences' as a counterpoint. Rather, equivalence itself presupposes difference as the basis upon which it is possible at all (p. 18). In light of this, we may suggest a sixth object of critique upon which the preceding five rest. The critique of *difference* is necessary. Such a critique destabilises the foundation without which the positing of identity is neither necessary nor possible.

Identity and difference are mutually implicated within one another. A dialectical critique is necessary. This would 'destablize' identity and difference by other means than merely the latter's affirmation (p. 18). Indeed, Jameson goes as far as to suggest that the dialectic

came into being to handle a strange and unparalleled historical situation, namely one in which everything is different and yet remains the same [...]. The dialectic is then a mode of thinking able to combine the singular and the general in a unique way, or better still, to shift gears from the one to the other and back again, to *identify* them in such a way that they remain different. (pp. 133-4)

Only the dialectic, then, suffices for the study and critique of the equation. A dialectical critique addresses itself to the implicated nature of identity and difference. It touches upon the foundational character of both identity and difference with reference to equivalence itself. Jameson opposes to his interpretation of *Capital* the 'anti-identity' standpoint of Adorno. Jameson ascribes to the latter a belief in the 'primacy of the singular' and the 'unassimilable differences of everything that surrounds us'. This differs from the critique of the equation posed by Jameson via Marx (p. 22). The Adornian standpoint isolates difference as a positive factor. In so doing, it ignores the dialectical relationship with identity that difference immanently entails.

The affirmation of difference as a counterprinciple to identity may lead to a certain circularity. Here, one cannot help to return to equivalence as a means by which difference can be ordered and organised. Equivalence functions as a Kantian category through which the diverse, particular chaos of reality meets with the capacity of perception to grasp it. There is of course a temptation to posit this as the result of an immanent practice of the mind. But this temptation is resistible with recourse to the complementary treatments of Kant's thought we find in Horkheimer and Sohn-Rethel.¹⁵ Their accounts do not situate the concepts and categories through which perception grasps the world in eternal faculties of human cognition. Rather, they situate them in the system of commodity exchange.

¹⁵ See Horkheimer 1972[1976] (especially pp. 215-6) and Sohn-Rethel 1978

Jameson suggests that by inviting the drawing of equivalence, difference lies within the dialectic of identity rather than without. Critique must target the equation. It must address the mathematical abstraction by which 'radically distinct objects' are 'grasped as equivalents of one another.' This opens up upon the critique of the ideological ramifications and expressions of the equation. Jameson provides an inexhaustive list of potential subjects of extended critique. The critique of the equation threatens the contract, the just price and the fair wage. It challenges concepts of equality and equilibrium. It undermines epistemological and artistic reflection (pp. 22-23).

The answer to the question with which a critique of the equation grapples lies in *money*. It is by means of money that 'one thing can be "the same" as another'. This money achieves via its 'crystallisation' of different and specific individual labours in a single social form (p. 35):

For money is the crystallization of the contradiction and not its effacement: it now renders the contradiction workable; with money we may now inhabit it and live among its dualities. Money has not solved the riddle of the equation- how different things could possibly be the same- but it has turned that conundrum into coin of the realm which will allow us to forget about it and go about our business. (p. 45)

Money temporarily defers the contradiction of equivalence. Yet it does not fully explain how profit can arise from the exchange of equivalents. It does, however, allow one to perceive profit in some way. A more orthodox Marxist rendering of this issue surfaces in David Harvey's reading of *Capital* Volume Two.¹⁶ Harvey contends that a commodity is not divisible in and of itself. It is not so that one part of the car is profit, another remains as capital, another as surplus value etc. The commodity form limits the degree to which you can tell the surplus-value and profit produced and realised.

But, in the money form, Harvey wagers, surplus-value is determinable. 'You cannot see how much surplus-value there was in the commodity until it goes into its monetary form', suggests Harvey.¹⁷ This is true enough. But we might go further and claim that the surplus-value is not *there* to be discovered or made apparent in the first place. Rather, it is only brought into existence in the moment that the object of labour sells as a commodity for money.

Doubtless, in a more subtle sense it is a *process* that progresses in abstraction over the course of the circuit as a whole. But, ultimately, money *constitutes* rather than *reveals* value, bringing about that which is measured by means of measure itself. Thus, Harvey's assertion

¹⁶ Marx 1992

¹⁷ Harvey 2012

of the 'illusory character of money' with reference to value is open to disputation. Rather, the appearance it takes vis-à-vis value is precisely a *real* appearance.

Surplus-value is determinable to some extent in the money form. But the latter obscures any connection with the realm of production through which the possibility of surplus-value obtains. As Harvey asserts, one can no longer perceive from the crystallisation of the money-form the acts of production that took place. Abstract labour and its monetary appearance are incredulous as regards the commodity's concrete origins. Yet, it is upon the basis of concrete particular labour that specific goods and services suggest specific acts of consumption. The criterion of use-value is dependent upon the possibility of exchange-value. Indeed, it owes its existence to the latter. Thus, the practices of production are essential to understand how profit is achievable in the context of the exchange of equivalents.

The second question, to remind ourselves, concerned the matter of how can 'the capitalist possibly make a profit out of the exchange of objects of equal value.' To answer the second question, Jameson suggests that we must take a trip into Marx's 'hidden abode of production'.¹⁸

Beyond the equalising appearance of money guaranteed by the equation, some place other than circulation must be sought. Here, we can discover how profit is possible in this context of equivalence. Jameson reads Marx as departing from the presentation of circulation given in the first part of *Capital* to proceed to the 'hidden abode. Here, Marx restates the qualities of the work that takes place rather than the quantities in which this work is abstracted from in exchange. Jameson suggests that the critique of the equation thereby culminates in a phenomenological undertaking. This destabilises the equation further by enunciating the experiences of those employed in the realm of production.

The realm of pure quantity quashes qualitative considerations. Marx highlights the outcome whereby '[f]rom the taste of wheat it is not possible to tell who produced it, a Russian serf, a French peasant or an English capitalist'. But, Marx writes, '[d]igging gold, mining iron, cultivating wheat and weaving silk are qualitatively different kinds of labour'.¹⁹ It is precisely the specificity of all labour in its concrete complexion that invites its abstraction. Abstract labour has no existence save a purely conceptual and retrospective one in the service of exchange. There is only concrete labour in its particular, qualitative manifestation. Abstract labour does not 'take place' at all. It takes a solely *ideal* form in the devices and practices of rationalisation, standardisation and time management. These facilitate the greater potential of the *future* abstraction of labour. They give an anticipatory

¹⁸ Marx 1990, p. 279

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 28-29

glimpse of the exchange abstraction as its precondition coheres. But abstract labour appears fully only in exchange.

The different qualities of specific labours are 'repressed from the quantitative, or better still, [...] fall out of its frame, remain undetected on its screens of measurement' (p. 25). In this they service the abstractive apparatus of the equation. Qualities are thus subordinated to the abstract movement of value. Jameson implies that restating these qualities enables the completion of the critique of the equation. The critique begins with the answering of the first question of *Capital's* riddle. It then proceeds from this to answer the second.

We began by reflecting upon the roles played by reconstruction and criticism in Jameson's interpretation of Marx's dual critique. Conceptualising these two aspects as concurrent stages of a critical method allows an appreciation of the scope and scale of Jameson's ambition. It places the work in a lineage including earlier proponents of the reconciliation of reconstruction and criticism, such as the Frankfurt School.

We may say that the critique of the equation reconstructs the conditions and characteristics of those five (or six) elements identified above. The criticism of these conditions restates the suppressed qualitative content of the work performed. This proceeds through the phenomenological account of experience. There are clear practical implications in this. One group who stand to profit are social science researchers interested in the investigation of life and work under capital. *Representing Capital* has significant exegetical ramifications. To the uninitiated, it may seem an imposing work of Marxology. But, more pressingly, this book derives from Marx a methodological model by which critical social inquiry into capitalist forms can proceed.

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